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INFO RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1354
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9461
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7641
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SUBJECT: ERSHAD TELLS AMBASSADOR HE WILL SOON ANNOUNCE HIS
DECISION TO JOIN BNP

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis; Reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) On November 2, Ambassador and poloff (notetaker) met with Jatiya Party (JP) Chairman and former President Ershad along with JP Secretary General Ruhul Amin Howlander and International and Diplomatic Affairs Secretary Golam Moshi. Ershad said that he would announce his joining the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) alliance within a few days, as the BNP has "agreed to my condition that I be named President if only for six months." He added that the Awami League only offered him 31 seats in Parliament and the position of Deputy Leader of Parliament, which he considered beneath him.

¶2. (C) Ershad doubted that the Awami League (AL) would boycott the elections, and said that "if the Awami League doesn't participate, then we will do better." He estimated that his strength in areas of Rangpur, Sylhet, Comilla would enable him to win 30 to 40 seats, adding that "I have solid vote banks throughout the country." Asked if Jamaat Islami (JI) is an asset to the four party alliance, Ershad said that JI's student and financial wings are strong, but "they are isolated from the people due to their connection with Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)." JI's weakness has become a big problem for the BNP, he said.

¶3. (C) Ambassador noted the recent violence and appealed to Ershad to call for calm. Ershad responded that the Jatiya Party is always against violence. He added that the violence has only hurt the AL as people have now forgotten BNP's inability to stem increasing prices and provide electricity and are only focused now on the AL bloody agitation.

¶4. (C) Ershad noted that KM Hassan stepped aside as Chief Advisor "for the good of the country" but doubted that Chief Election Commissioner Aziz would do the same, even though "everyone is against him."

BUTENIS